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ABSTRACT

Graduation, Reality, and Dual-Role Skills (GRADS) is a vocational home economics program in Ohio for pregnant students and young parents in grades 7 through 12 in junior high schools, senior high schools, and vocational schools. Goals of the program are to: (1) increase the likelihood the participants will remain in school during pregnancy, after childbirth, and until graduation; (2) help participants carry out positive health care practices for themselves and their children in pre- and postnatal states; (3) provide participants with knowledge and skill related to child development and positive parenting practices; (4) prepare participants for work; and (5) encourage participants to balance work and family. GRADS helps teenage parents become more aware of community resources and graduate from high school, a step toward economic independence. In urban areas, the GRADS program is conducted at one or more schools every day. Other areas base the GRADS teachers at joint vocational schools and have students meet for a minimum of two periods weekly. A 2-year GRADS research project conducted from 1986 to 1988 in Ohio surveyed students when they entered GRADS and 1 year after the birth of their babies; positive gains in self-esteem were found. The GRADS program in Ohio and Lawrence County has a dropout rate of 5 to 16 percent, compared with a national dropout rate for teen parents of 80 to 85 percent. During the 1988-89 school year, 119 programs operated in 211 school districts in Ohio. (KC)

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GRADS Program in Ohio Empowers Parenting Students to GRADUATE

Judy Ferguson

The GRADS program has shown a dramatic reduction in the dropout rate of pregnant and parenting teens. Since 1980 the dropout rate has ranged from 5.2% to 16%. This compares with a national percentage of 80% to 85%.

Graduation, Reality, and Dual-Role Skills (GRADS) is a vocational home economics school-based program for pregnant students and young parents in grades 7 through 12 in junior high schools, senior high schools, and vocational schools. Goals of this program are to:

- -increase the likelihood that participants will remain in school during pregnancy and after the birth of their child and stay to the point of graduation.
- -help participants carry out positive health care practices for themselves and their children in both prenatal and postnatal stages.
- -provide participants with knowledge and skill related to child development and positive parenting practices.
- -prepare participant for the world of work.
- -encourage participants to set goals toward balancing work and family.

Each year over a million teenage pregnancies occur in the United States; almost one-sixth of all births are to teenage women. Forty percent of American's teenage girls will become pregnant before they are twenty. Only 3 percent of teenage mother's who have their babies give them up for adoption; 97 percent keep their babies.

The Alan Guttmacher Institute has compiled the teenage pregnancy rates in six different countries. It finds the the teenage pregnancy rate of the United States is twice as high as any of the other six nations. Forty percent of teens age seventeen and younger are sexually active. Two out of three pregnant teenagers drop out of school. Seventy-five percent of teen pregnancies involve males who are not minors.

In Ohio in 1984, 39 percent of pregnant teenager waited until after their first trimester to receive prenatal care or did not receive it at all. In Ohio, hospital costs for low birthweight babies averages $1,000 a day and from $20,000 to $40,000 per hospital stay. Nutritionally stressed teenagers, who often delay seeking prenatal care, frequently give birth to low birthweight babies. Such infants face a higher risk of having immature organ systems, developmental problems, mental retardation, and other physical complications. They also face a higher morbidity rate.

Out of eighty eight counties in Ohio, Lawrence county has the seventh highest rate of teen births. It has the fifteenth highest rate of teen births paid for by Medicaid.

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According to a 1986 Louis Harris poll, only one-third of those teens who have had intercourse use a contraceptive all the time, about one-third never use contraceptives and one-third use contraceptives sometimes or most of the time. The Governor's Task Force of Adolescent Sexuality and Pregnancy reports that at the current rate of teen sexual activity, "40 percent of the girls now 14 years of age will become pregnant at some time during their teens."

In the nation and Ohio, the cost of teenage childbirth is high. Poverty and public dependency frequently await the teenage mother and child. The Center for Population options, reports that a single teen birth is estimated to cost the public $15,620 in 1985 dollars over 20 years. Increasing the likelihood of a future of public dependency is the fact that 20 percent of teen mothers will become pregnant again within a year of having their first child.

Today, pregnancy in some circles means instant prestige; and, if there is trouble at home, it is the very best way to spite parents (Oeltinger and Mooney, p. 49). Adolescent girls tend to rationalize their decision to have a baby in a number of ways. They may perceive the baby as a way of insuring a boyfriend's love. The baby may provide them with someone to love who will love them in return. For some, having a baby is a way of proving they are womanly and adult.

Teenage pregnancy may be the result of misbehavior exhibited by a depressed teenager, who has become sexually promiscuous (Griffin, p. 222). Incest also accounts for some teenage pregnancies. However, many teenage pregnacies are the result of statuatory rape (Stuart and Wells, p. 8).

Most teen pregnancies are unplanned and unwanted. The Guttmacher Institute estimates 80 percent. With low school achievement, and limited employment opportunities, ther is little reason for these young women to terminate the pregnancy or to prevent the next one. One out of every five pregnant teenagers gets pregnant within one month of starting to have sex (Christopher, p. 26). Research has shown that sexually active teenagers to not seek contraceptives for at least six months.

Porter (1979) lists the following similarities of single parent families:

1. Many girls, who are highly motivated to continue their education, drop out of school due to lack of child care.
2. Alienation from her friends and inconsistency in her behavior and attitudes with others exist.
3. She is still seeking to determine her identity.
4. Earning enough money to support herself and the child without living with parents is an ever present problem.
5. Support systems are often limited, leaving the mother to cope with the stress alone. (Child abuse is common among teenage parents.)

The following case study illustrates some of these characteristics and how the GRADS program works. Tina, a petite sixteenyear old blonde, became pregnant at the beginning of her junior year. Her boyfriend, who wasnineteen, wanted to marry her. However, she decided that this would

only complicate things. GRADS classes helped Tina develop and reinforce the decisionmaking skills for this decision.

During her pregnancy, GRADS encouraged good nutrition, and exercises to help with delivery. A hospital tour was made. Labor and delivery information was studied in detail. Baby Gloria, delivered by Caesarean section, was born in January. Two weeks later, Tina returned to school (not the four to six weeks recommended). She completed her junior year making good grades and developing a growing sense of responsibility toward Gloria.

Home visits and telephone contact throughout the summer encouraged Tina's return to school. She returned in the fall to complete her senior year. She continues to date the father of her baby, but not with the approval of her family.

Receiving child support was a problem which her GRADS teacher encouraged Tina to pursue. With the help of legal counsel she now receives a monthly support payment from the baby's father. Tina received emotional support and encouragement from her family, GRADS teacher and class to remain in school. She graduated and is now working part-time as well as being the single parent of a toddler. Although living with her parents, she makes regular car payments for a new car. Tina is attending college and working toward a degree.

The baby growing inside a teen mother is in a most dependent, and often risky place. Young teens are high risk for developing toxemia and delivering premature or low birthweight babies. They are more likely to be undernourished. Pregnant teenagers are 9 percent more likely to have anemia, and 23 percent more likely to have complications related to prematurity, than mothers aged 20 to 24 (Stengel, p. 87).

Low birthweight is the most immediate health problem. Babies born to teenagers often are born too small, too soon. Low birthweight babies may have immature organ systems, mental retardation, difficulty controlling body temperature and blood sugar levels, and an increased risk of dying in early infancy.

Before pregnancy, most sexually active teenagers think, " It will never happen to me." Each day, the emotional pain is multiplied many times (Christopher, pp. 25-26). At first denial of the pregnancy is common among teenagers. Many stop going to school and withdraw from their friends. It is the end of their world. GRADS individualized instruction, referral, and emotional support helps them to cope. They also draw strength from others in class.

Assuming adult responsibilities is difficult for most teenagers. The pregnant teens self concept changes as she incorporates her new experiences into her self identity (Bedger, 1980). She may become more assertative in situations that involve the every day care of her baby.

Being bailed out by a boyfriend seldom happens. In fact, pregnancy often spells the end of relationship. Some teenage fathers do care. Diane Turner, head of Insights, a program for teen mothers and fathers in Portland, Oregon, says she found many young fathers want to help their

child, even when they are no longer close to the mother.

Teen fathers often do not know what is expected of them. They are rarely forced to assume responsibility for their half of the pregnancy. Babies and their moms need love and a sense of belonging, as well as someone to help change diapers. A young black father enrolled in GRADS explains: "I feel the responsibility for having a child of my own. I look forward to seeing him grow up."

New family patterns are emerging today. This family includes the young single parent, the children that she began bearing in her teens, and her grandchildren. Black teenagers who have babies often head their own households and depend primarily on public assistance. At age 30, they may be grandmothers to their unwed children's babies. (Height, p. 76

Without child care, school becomes impossible. Many remain careless about birth control. About 15 percent of pregnant teens become pregant again within one year; 30 percent do so within two years (Stengel, p. 87). GRADS works with students giving them accurate information of birth control with the hope of preventing subsequesnt pregnancies.

Two out of three pregnant teenagers drop out of school. With her education cut short, the teenage mother may lack job skills, which may cause her to live in poverty. The income of teen mothers is half that of those who first gave birth in their 20s. They may be financially dependent on her family or on welfare.

The cost of having a baby was set in a congressional report by Joseph Califano, Secretary of HEW, at $1,600, including all prenatal, delivery, and postpartum services (Oeltinger, p.110). During the first year of life, a baby cost $579 in 1958, $11,835 today. The projected cost for raising a baby born between 1978 and 1998, from birth to eighteen, has been projected at $84,000 without a college education. These projections were made by researchers on the Community Council of Greater New York.

Becoming a teenage parent, creates an educational deficit for mothers and fathers. Young mothers earn half of the median income ($6,750) earned by families without a teenage pregnancy. Two thirds live below the $6,682 poverty level. The teen father fares little better, and they do not usually support their children unless they live with them. Consequently, nearly one-fourth of all teen mothers receive federal support through Aid to Dependent Children program. Day care is an essential service if they are to pursue their education.

GRADS helps the teenage parent become more aware of community resources. Reducing their educational deficit is one goal of the GRADS program. Graduation from high school is the first step to helping them gain economic independence.

There are two basic structures to the GRADS program. In an urban area, a stationary GRADS teacher will conduct classes at one or more junior or senior highs every day of the week during the same period of the day.

Other areas base the GRADS teachers at the Joint Vocational Schools and some feeder schools. Students meet a minimum of two periods weekly with additonal seminars and individual projects and may receive pro-rated school credit. This is used when a school does not have an adequate number of eligible students to qualify for a full unit of GRADS.

GRADS began in 1980 as a Ceta Pilot Project in 12 school districts. By 1985, it had grown and expanded to 70 school districts. Lawrence County Joint Vocational School began GRADS during the 1984-85 school year. It has now grown to a program with 4 coordinators, who cover all of the schools in the county.

The Adolescent Parent Resource Guide was developed and printed in 1989. This has added much to our basic curriculum. Inservice on the use of this guide was held during the summer of 1989.

The success of the GRADS program may be attributed to the excellent delivery system of the Ohio Department of Edûcation's Vocational Home Economics Department. Inservice is provided to GRADS teachers on a yearly basis. Regional meetings are also held twice a year.

A state wide two year GRADS research project was done to evaluate the effectivenesss of Ohio's program. Data collection began in 1986 with 1700 GRADS and NonGRADS students, both male and female, and concluded in 1988. Students were surveyed when they entered GRADS either when pregnant or as a parent. They were surveyed a second time three months later and finally one year after the birth of their baby.

GRADS students were consistently low on the "sexuality" subscale (Offer Self-Image Questionnaire for Adolescents or OSIQA (Offer, Ostrov and Howard, 1982) and considerably lower than the NonGRADS. These results gave direction to the curriculum. Much emphasis was placed on positive self. Our resource guide has an increased emphasis on parenting concerns, such as realistic expectations, children with special needs, teen parenthood, interaction with children, discipline, sibling rivalry, work stress, rights and responsibilities, child abuse and neglect, and family law. A preliminary finding seems to be that it takes a long period of time (ie. over ayear) to reveal positive gains in self image and parenting attitudes while maintaining student/teen parent roles. Therefore, one finding from this research is that it is critical for students to enter GRADS as early in their pregnancies as possible and to remain as long as possible to better achieve the objectives of the program.

During the 1988-89 school year, seventy-two GRADS Coordinators and 1,891 GRADS students participated ina project called "GRADS Education for Managing Child Behavior" with Jacy Showers, Ed.,., Director of the Ohio Research Institure on Child Abuse Prevention. This project researched the use of a series of child behavior management cards to teach students appropriate developmental and behavioral expectations of children and nonviolent approaches to behavior management. The average post-project score was 80 percent, compared with 60 percent prior to using the cards. There were ststistically significant improvements in knowledge on all questions.

Single Parent and Homemakeer Grants helped provide child care and transportation for 77 percent of our GRADS programs for pregnant and parenting teens. Day care monies wereprovided for at-school day care, community contract day care, or in-home day care. Transportation monies were used for travel of parent and child from their home to day care, parent to school and return to day care, and parent and child to their home. This assistance was received by 1,064 GRADS students. In our county, 37 students received this assistance.

During the 1988-89 school year, 119 GRADS programs (36.7 percent increase) operated in 211 school districts. In 88-89, there were 6,195 students (37.4 percent increase) enrolled in GRADS classes.

In Lawrence County, our dropout rate for the school year was 6.9%. In addition to teaching classes, GRADS teachers are provided time to meet with providers of community services, make home and hospital visits, conference students, and work closely with school personnel.

Each student's situation is different. We give them the encouragement they need to make a variety of decisions. One of our biggest problems is having teenagers see how tough life with a baby can be. Peer panels of teen parents would provide some information on this.

Getting teenagers to understand that the future does not often hold great promise for a teenage mother and her child. Having them understand that it can happen to them is on of our greatest challenges. Teenagers seem not to realize the consequences of early sexual activity, and the responsibilities.that it can bring.

The comments of some of my GRADS students sum it up. One student says, " It is a great experience to know you're bringing a life, a part of you into this world. I love being a Mom, but it is a lot of responsibility, and it takes away a lot of the free time I used to have." Another says, "Being a parent is difficult because you really do not have a social life. You have a lot of responsibility. You give up a lot just to get a little."

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June 10,11,and 12, 1990

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